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Soul-Error

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THE SOUL as twinned to error? I begin by way of Freud. In his essay on "The Uncanny," Freud explores a spatial confusion: a state of mind in which one sees "out there" something palpably shaped from "in here." Freud's most striking vignette in "The Uncanny" rehearses how, some years earlier, he found himself wandering through an unknown Italian village, looking for the train station. He perused his map, made the appropriate right and left turns—and found himself in the red-light district. Time for reconnoitering: he rechecked his coordinates so as not to make the same mistakes again, set out once more for the station, via a different sequence of streets and turns—and ended up in the red-light district. Quite frustrated by now—what was wrong with his village map?—he tried a third time. Scrutinizing the map with an attentiveness never required before, he plotted a foolproof course, and set out once more for the station. Need I say where he ended up?

Some would scratch their heads at this point and write off the search for the train station as simply failed, or try to find a taxi to take them there. They'd know they were lost beyond self-correction. Freud—and, I suspect, anyone else who shares his sense of the deviousness of the mind—began to realize that he was not getting lost, but being found. Against his conscious intentions, he must all along have been looking for the red-light district.

This essay, though not drawn to the red-light district, returns repeatedly to the traffic that unpredictably occurs between us ("in here") and the world ("out there"). Because we are endowed with stunningly intricate minds, we move through space and time interestingly, circuitously, mistakenly. With respect to time, we look not only straight ahead but forward and backward, too. What we see from either end of the temporal telescope differs greatly from what we see here, now, in our presence. As for space, we are—surprisingly for a species so

cerebrally gifted—susceptible to wandering; we easily get lost. Or if not lost, subject to altering takes (mis-takes) on what lies before us.

Some three centuries before Freud, Michel de Montaigne was fascinated by kindred aspects of the human comedy of misperception. His phrase for how we stubbornly insist on misreading our world is "soul-error." By this he means an ineradicable tendency, seeded deep within us, to get things wrong. Because we enjoy but also suffer from what Montaigne insists on calling "soul," we tend to fall into error. Montaigne's phrase may strike us as surprising, perhaps even contradictory. We tend to ascribe to the soul (if we use the term at all) that dimension of ourselves that we deem deepest and truest. To characterize the soul as a faculty inseparable from error requires some unpacking. Here is the gloss Montaigne himself supplies, from "On Presumption":

> I feel myself oppressed by an error of my soul which I dislike. . . . I try to correct it, but uproot it I cannot. It is that I lower the value of the things I possess, because I possess them, and raise the value of things when they are foreign, absent, and not mine. . . . The housekeeping, the house, the horse of my neighbor, if equal in value, seem better than my own, because they are not mine.

I came across this passage while reading commentary on Marcel Proust. But the resonance of soul-error did not begin with Montaigne, nor does it end with Proust. When Groucho Marx avers that he would never join any club that would take him in, we see that soul-error is alive and well in the mid-twentieth century. It is true that Groucho's ego preoccupations—a mix of self-promotion and self-loathing—may predispose him to this condition. The half-Jewish Proust—part-Catholic bourgeois, part-Jewish homosexual pariah—may likewise be susceptible for related reasons. But the roots go deeper, touching down on an ensemble of predilections that beset identity itself.

Montaigne's French terms—*erreur d'âme* rather than *erreur de l'âme*—denote a constitutive bond between the two elements, not a remediable error. Like *chemin de fer* (French for "railroad"; literally "path of iron"), where there is no "road" unless there is iron for making

its "rails," so there is no soul without error that permanently affects its conditions of operation. Soul tends to move on rails of error. This is hardly how the Judeo-Christian tradition speaks of soul. What might it mean to regard soul as the dimension of our inner being most intractably committed to mistaking?

Montaigne's examples shed further light. Soul is that faculty in us that registers an ongoing spatial comedy. I covet from a distance what you have in your possession because. . .you have it and I do not. Your house, your horse, your spouse (he does not mention this last but that is his logic) are desirable because I do not have them. No one knows better than Montaigne that if he had your house, your horse, your spouse, they would at once lose their aura. Their appeal is inseparable from their being *not-his*. Bring them into his realm of possessions and they reduce to only what they are. This is the comedy of presence/absence. We denigrate the value of what is materially here and ours. We inflate the value of what is immaterially not here and not ours.

It is no surprise that the opposite is sometimes also true. What I possess may appear to me to be the best, not because of any intrinsic value but because it is mine. I have a friend whose wife, wines, house, cars, dogs, and travel plans are all the best: because they are his. But devaluing what one has—and longing for what one's neighbor has—is probably more widespread. Desire can hardly function without it, and desire seems in no danger of ceasing to fuel the gambits of social life.

Proust's huge novel endlessly replays the drama of soul-error, beginning with its opening scene: the ordeal of the good-night kiss. The little boy (Marcel) at the center of the novel has been lying in bed for hours, waiting anxiously for his mother's kiss; he cannot fall asleep without it. So, staying up until his parents' dinner party is over, he waylays her coming up the stairs. Against all parental rules, he will have that kiss. His father—fatigued and half-grasping his son's misery—allows the mother to spend the night in her boy's bedroom.

Let's pay close attention to the spatial/temporal framing of that goodnight kiss. The kiss—passionately anticipated while his mother is downstairs at her dinner party—becomes anticlimactic when he actually receives it. Taking place now (and securely *his*), it feels like what it

merely is: just her kiss. Next, that bedroom he is in feels like a prison (because he is in it) separating him from what he desires outside it.

The actual place we are in pales in comparison to the siren call of the places we have been in *before* or are not in *yet*. Such fantasy logic underwrites a vexing dimension of Marcel's lifelong relation to place itself—and perhaps of ours as well. Where we actually are (once we've familiarized it) tends to shed its intricacy, to become boring, taken for granted. It becomes boring because we've made terms with its contours, put it to sleep. But finding ourselves in unfamiliar places can be menacing: settings we do not (yet) know. Such places are ones we can (at first) do nothing with. I trust I am not alone in needing help from sleeping pills, now and then, when I travel to unknown places, more often than when I remain at home. Unfamiliar space—the situation of me somewhere unknown, right now—can feel unsettling enough to keep me awake long into the night.

These same new places, however, may be powerfully attractive, prior to our actually engaging them. Is this because—absent rather than present—they come to us as purely mental images, shaped to immaterial configurations we have learned to desire? In Proust's novel, soirées and ballroom parties elsewhere are exciting so long as anticipated, yet anticlimactic when later experienced. The basic energy that fuels social climbing is the desire to escape from where we are (a little world we have domesticated, put to sleep) and get ourselves admitted into the fantasized space of where we are not yet. In his fictional world always—and in our real world all too often—the allure of what is sought disintegrates on being possessed. Such disenchantment sounds the bass note of Montaigne's soul-error.

What mandates such disenchantment? Is it that the immaterial image of what we seek and the materiality of what can be actually encountered exist in realms that never meet? What can be encountered must take on embodiment—be extensive in space and time—in order to be engaged. But what we passionately seek escapes these limitations; it gets its seductive lineaments by way of images saturated in our thoughts, feelings, and desires. Such an ensemble has no material

basis at all. Proust's most memorable instance of this irreducible difference is the boy Marcel's feverish desire to travel to Florence and Venice. So feverish, in fact, that when his father says they are going next week to Florence—and time now to pack his bags—the boy (faced with a clash between actual places and his gorgeous vision of them) falls into a swoon. The trip is postponed. Put better, the trip is aborted. The Florence and Venice that Marcel dreamed of visiting were lovingly constituted by way of books and paintings devoted to these cities. He had absorbed the images arising from these sources, taken them into himself like mother's milk. They are the stuff of dreams.

Taken into himself, yet not only himself, and not taken in by mere personal caprice. The multibillion-dollar tourism industry battens on its promise to collapse the difference between images of the exotic (as the mind caressingly envisages it), on the one hand, and unfamiliar places we can actually encounter, on the other. As people age, as their tenure on the globe grows shaky, their desire to visit the places they have only dreamed about increases. Vast hordes of retired people fill the buses, airplanes, and cruise ships committed to transporting them, bodily, to these long-envisaged exotic places. The cruise ships exploit this desire with an unbeatable formula. They will provide their elderly clientele with pseudoengagements, reductively staged rituals standing in for more intricate encounters with the otherness of unfamiliar sites. Yet the travelers need abandon no familiar bodily comforts along the way. It may be dreamed-of images that get them onto the cruise, but it is the copious meals and familiar activities on board the ship that make them likely to return for more. Fueling this industry is the pathos of a shared, largely speechless hunger. These elderly voyagers would like to know more about the earth they inhabit before departing it for good. They half grasp how tenuous their contract with place actually is. Pseudoengagements with the desired unknown are better than none.

Not just the old are susceptible to the allure of travel. How many younger people have dreamed—for months or years—of going to

Paris? Finally they purchase their plane tickets, climb aboard the jet, and during the night (six hours that are so long, so short) they cross the huge Atlantic. The moment I focus on comes next, at seven or eight o'clock in the morning, after Charles de Gaulle Airport and in the bus or taxi taking them into the awakening city. Sleep deprived, anxious, and eager, they look all around. Can this be *Paris*? Where is *Paris*? What they mainly see on the way in are graffiti-chalked billboards, highways crowded with trucks and cars, nondescript warehouses and office buildings on their left and their right: not so different from the city they left! This whirl of incessant material activity hardly has them in mind. They are eventually deposited at their hotel in the fantasized city, and (obscurely troubling their week of scheduled activities) a wordless suspicion may continue to gnaw at them. The sprawling ensemble that is Paris—the material city they've been industriously crossing on foot and by bus and metro—keeps refusing to merge with the gorgeous images of the city lodged inside their heads. Even the Eiffel Tower—replete with long queues before going up, various concession stands surrounding the entry, numerous clusters of unruly tourists speaking foreign languages as their leaders try to shepherd them into docility, and a visible smattering of wary policemen—is not *the Eiffel Tower*. These two realms—one material and indifferent to subjective desire, the other immaterial and embroidered by subjective desire—do not coincide.

When I was struggling through my years of graduate school, a fellow student sought to describe our pervasive sense of not being in control of our situation, unable to access the imagined center of operations. We were condemned, he proposed, to remain in the "antechamber." It might be next to the main room, but it was not that room and could never become that room. The big decisions (the ones affecting our futures) were ones we imagined taking place elsewhere, in the real chamber where things that matter got decided.

That phrase—antechamber—has stayed with me over the years. Whenever I teach Kafka, I feel again its resonance. Joseph K (in either *The Trial* or *The Castle*) cannot make his way out of the antechamber.

His fate turns on finding and entering the main chamber, where the Court considers his case, where the Castle reveals its bureaucratic logic. Kafka's readers eventually realize he will never get there. The logic of his defeat is simple. Every room K enters is, by virtue of his entering it, an antechamber (Groucho: "I'd never join a club that would allow a person like me to become a member"). Kafka's fiction unnerves us because something deep inside half recognizes our incapacity to make exterior space our own, once and for all. We stubbornly intuit that our internalized images of place fail to coincide with the maps of what is materially outside us. At the beginning, as infants, we had to work hard to learn those outer maps. At the end, growing senile, we find that the maps have become opaque again. Space seems, uncannily, not to be meant for us, at the beginning and near the ending. The far-from-senile Kafka suffered the defects and insights of something like senility throughout his life. "I have experience," he declared, "and I am not joking when I say that it is a seasickness on dry land."

I have no data supporting my next claim, but I would hazard that up to half of our nightmares revolve around becoming physically lost. Or if not lost, then no longer in charge of what remains familiar but has become uncanny. Dream settings slip their manageability, turn resistant to our organizational will; space goes gamey. This spatial slipperiness is true not only of dreams. Tolstoy long ago realized that battles do not radiate from some organizing center, that the elaborate plans that precede them—like the authoritative accounts that come later—are equally false to the unmasterable chanciness of the material event itself. Anyone reading through the voluminous materials about Nixon's Watergate White House (in the early 1970s) would eventually recognize, as well, that, despite an awesome will to control the outer damage, *there was no commanding master plan*. No single mind was coordinating all the messy, many-peopled machinations. New events spilled out as unanticipated consequences of earlier ones; the left hand didn't quite know what the right hand was doing. This is no less true of Trump's chaotic White House. No master blueprint controls the incoherent yet interrelated maneuvers spasmodically taking place. This

despite our desire—no less than the president's—to unify them all (by a misleading shorthand) as "coming from the White House."

Soul-error: the comedy of the mind's altering relation to objects and others and events in time and space. We see them differently, according to whether they are materially here or imagined as elsewhere. No less, we see them one way if part of our present moment, but otherwise if remembered from the past or fantasized into the future. Montaigne, Kafka, and Groucho Marx reveal the warp besetting our optic, reminding us that to see at all is to see with bias: from somewhere more like an antechamber than a fantasized Command Central.

Such distortion only intensifies if we consider how often "seeing the other" is unknowingly inflected by the self who does the seeing. Take that precious moment all parents are familiar with: their screaming child, with whom they've been quarreling for what seems like hours, is finally in bed and has fallen asleep. The parents tiptoe into the child's bedroom, batten on the becalmed spectacle, and their hearts swell with love—their child, so troublemaking earlier, so precious now. Yet reconsider the optics at play, the perceptual slippages in time and space. The troublemaking child, obstreperous and demanding an hour earlier, has been replaced by the image of a tranquil, sleeping one. This sleeping one, mentally absent though bodily in the room, finally quiescent, has become wholly accessible to the parents' conception of it. Silent, unresisting, the child is now *theirs*—again. What they are so moved by is less the actual child than the magnitude of their feeling for their offspring. Tomorrow they will quarrel again—embodied players in present time again, active wills opposed to each other—but for now the child has been subsumed into its parents' precious image.

That image will, in time, be replaced by subsequent images. Indeed, the parents will live out their lifelong relation to their child mainly by way of such images. Do we ever grant the extent to which others in our lives—the others we care for most—are accessed by way of our images of them? How else can we keep them with us? Whenever we depart from the materiality of the present moment—whenever we

remember, whenever we look forward and project—we are thinking and feeling and seeing in reference to images. Images of substantial beings, yes, but made immaterial now. They become housed spectrally inside us, and they take on in countless ways the imprint of that housing. This is how they become *ours*. More, this endless substitution of the immaterial image for the substantial being characterizes present experience as well. Partners living in the same house engage each other on a daily basis by way of images, each in another room doing what he or she wants to do, each thinking now and then of the other. Or even in the bedroom together, each one's eyes closed during or after a moment of intimacy, it is the images that predominate. That is how others continue to matter to us at all.

Soul-error: Montaigne's term implies that acts of misperception, affectionate or otherwise, are beyond correction. They reveal irremediable distortions in our traffic with our world. To be a self is to exact a price: to reckon others and objects and, in so doing, often to reckon them wrong. Finally, soul may be, in addition, that inner energy that not only tends to get others wrong, but that, over time, lets us see that we have done so—and gotten ourselves wrong as well. Milan Kundera has claimed more than once that the Czech word closest to "soul" is *litost*. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera defines *litost* as "a state of torment caused by a sudden insight into one's own miserable self." In a later essay, asserting that it is impossible to approach the idea of the soul without centering it on "regret," he returns to *litost*: "Litost," Kundera writes, "is an untranslatable Czech word. Its first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog. As for the meaning of this word, I have looked in vain in other languages for an equivalent, though I find it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it."

Insight into one's own miserable self, regret, the wail of an abandoned dog: these dimensions of soul come together comically, darkly, yet suggestively. (You don't have to be a self-exiled Czech writer, living out his life in Paris, to grasp the drama of displacement and reinvention that Kundera is referring to.) Soul would be that capacity in us that accompanies our creaturely, self-altering trajectory over time.

Accompanies, not transcends. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, thinkers may insist on hypothesizing soul as something precious that is beyond time, but Kundera has his eye on the pathos of our inescapable becoming. It is only later (if at all) that one catches glimpses of one's former "miserable self"—only later that this recognition engenders regret, even as one senses, only later, the wailing of abandoned beings (selves and others), the sorriness of earlier, once-proud choices. T. S. Eliot is mapping kindred territory in *Little Gidding* when he speaks of unwanted later recognitions:

> And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
> Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
> Of things ill done and done to others' harm
> Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
> Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.

Soul-error seems to betoken an incorrigible mis-taking—of others and ourselves—that pervades our lives in time. To learn of such error is bad news (it is no fun to discover how wrong one has been) yet it *is* funny, inexhaustibly so. As Keaton, Chaplin, and comedians before and after have known, few things are funnier than a sudden slippage of the gears, wherein you land on your back rather than giving orders on your feet. "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," Nell says to Hamm in Beckett's *Endgame*. Condemned to live the remainder of her life in a trash can, Nell ought to know. Whenever I have seen the play performed, she does not laugh as she utters the line.

The job of rueful reckoning may in fact be soul's elemental task: soul as the dimension of our being that registers our falling, that looks back and reassesses. In the West—at least since Sophocles's Oedipus plays—we have the highest regard for retrospective reassessment. We tend to call it recognition. The stuff of epiphany, it may well be priceless. Who could bear to pass a life in time without ever looking back and seeing more? This essay testifies to my drawing on insights (or what I take to be such) that were not available earlier. Life without the possibility of revision, as Dante knew, is experienced as hell.

Yet the countertruth is no less telling. In rewriting the past we erase its stubborn texture and reality—and our own, as players in it when it was actually unfolding as an intricate and unfinished present. How often a man who divorces a wife of thirty-years standing will then say (to himself, to others), "I never loved her after all." A friend of mine said to me just this, some twenty-five years ago. When I urged him to be more generous toward what had been good in their union—the abundant moments of shared humor and intimacy, the rearing of children in common—he refused to budge. It was taking all of his courage to make the case against his marriage. He could not at the same time make the case for it.

He eventually remarried, and his former wife struggled to remake her life; the gaping hole left in it by the failed marriage never disappeared. Each went on to develop new narratives about who they were and needed to become. Antechamber: do we ever escape it? Indubitable assessment and authority may reside in the main chamber, where those who seem to know beyond time make their unerring calls. But our lives unfold in a harder-to-map, obscurely altering elsewhere bedeviled with incompatible options, each (for a time) seductive in its own fashion. What we do not know now will later affect our choices—for good or for ill—more than what we do know now. "Nobody gets what they want. Never again are you the same," Jorie Graham writes. "The longing is to be pure. What you get is to be changed."

Proust refers to our incorrigible changeableness as "intermittence": the fact that, in time, we are never altogether there. We are instead intermittently there, ourselves for now, and our different selves for later. "On ne se réalise que successivement," so Proust puts it: one becomes oneself only over the course of time. We will not look the same to ourselves later, and it will be cause for regret. Not a regret, moreover, that if we were wiser we might have avoided. Passage through our cumulative time zones (the image is temporal, not spatial) does not permit the sustaining of heroic integrity. As error and its revision—and sometimes as undignified as the wail of an abandoned dog—the soul perseveres.

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